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TURNER-SPIES  
By Robert Parry  
WASHINGTON

Former CIA Director Stansfield Turner on Wednesday criticized the Navy for allowing an alleged spy ring to operate for 20 years, but he said the arrests show that the government has rebuilt its counter-intelligence capability.

"Clearly there was a laxness in Navy in checking on these people's behavior," Turner said in an interview. "There is some dismay that we've lost some important secrets (but) there is some consolation that our counter-intelligence efforts are beginning to be more effective."

John A. Walker Jr., 47, a former Navy communications specialist, is charged with running a spy ring that the FBI says sold secrets to the Soviet Union for at least 20 years. Also arrested were his son, brother and a California man - all of them active or retired Navy men.

Turner, a retired Navy admiral and President Carter's director of the Central Intelligence Agency, said the CIA's ability to ferret out spies had been damaged by its longtime counterintelligence chief, James J. Angleton, who was removed in 1974.

Turner said Angleton "was ineffective because he was chasing ghosts and maligning innocent people ... We've been rebuilding counterintelligence in the CIA since then."

Reached at his home in Arlington, Va., Angleton declined direct comment on the assertions but said "time will tell" who was right. In the past, Angleton's supporters have described him as having been sacrificed as a scapegoat.

Turner said a greater number of Soviets entering the United States since the period of superpower detente in the early 1970s also contributed to increased spying, although he added he does not favor cutting such visits.

He also said the number of Americans with clearance to read secret material should be cut by about 30 percent from its current total of more than 4 million. He scored the Reagan administration for classifying so much information that some government officials have lost respect for the need to keep important secrets.

Turner complained that in preparation of his new book, "Secrecy and Democracy," CIA censors ordered more than 100 deletions despite his arguments that much of that information was readily available on the public record.

On another issue, Turner urged Congress to reject President Reagan's request for more funds for CIA-sponsored Nicaraguan rebels, saying such a move would increase pressure on both the administration and Nicaragua's leftist government to negotiate their differences.

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Turner said paramilitary covert actions, like the one begun against Nicaragua in 1981, should be limited to extraordinary situations. He said Nicaragua, with a shattered economy and 2.5 million people, is "certainly not the threat that has been overmagnified by the president."

Turner also warned that American involvement with the Contra rebels and such actions as the mining of Nicaragua's harbors allowed the United States to be depicted as supporting "terrorism."

"If we are that associated with being terrorists, how can we lead a crusade against terrorism, how can we inveigh as the president does against state-supported terrorism by the Iranians and the Syrians?" he said. "We've lost the moral edge against terrorism."